

PACIFIC IDENTITY THROUGH SPACE AND TIME IN LILY LAITA'S *VA I TA TAEAO LALATA E AUNOA MA GAGANA*

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I used to paint on black, so that things emerged from out of the dark,
figures from the past.

Lily Laita quoted in *Speaking in Colour:
Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage*

Created in 2000, Lily Laita's painting *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana* remains a timeless illustration of the vibrancy of Pacific Islander identity through space and time (figure 1).¹ In this large-scale polyptych, Laita maps the infinite possibilities relating to Pacific identity through the medium of visual storytelling, an integral component of her artistic practice. Specifically, *Va i Ta* is a narrative exploration of the ways in which the temporal and spatial nuances of the *vā* (space between) have shaped Pacific identity from its island origins to the Pacific Islander diaspora in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In the painting, Laita touches on five themes: how notions of space and time are related to her artistic practice; how continuous narrative can be suggested without a reliance on sequential order; how mythology plays a role in continuing sociocultural rituals; how land is an enduring symbol of identity; and how art conveys the different facets of identity as connected to multiple geographical spheres. Accordingly, Laita's *Va i Ta* represents and embodies "the space between"—that is, the space between where Pacific identity is negotiated and expressed in an Aotearoa/New Zealand context.²

STORYTELLING IN THE *VĀ*

In her role as visual artist, Laita uses storytelling, an indigenous mode of communication that features in Aotearoa/New Zealand and across the Pacific to inform her work. In *Va i Ta*, a dynamically gestural painting, the artist organizes compositional space through the play of color, light, and shadow on canvas. In the painting, Laita captures the performance of Pacific identity as it exists in the *vā*, creating a kinetic and tactile space by layering oil and shellac, achieving stunning multidimensional effects. As she explained: "Working with oils and

working on white, you talk about depth more than surface and especially working in transparent thin glaze. By doing that it creates more depth, it's illusion, the sense of that and within that I can create more stories" (Laita 2001).

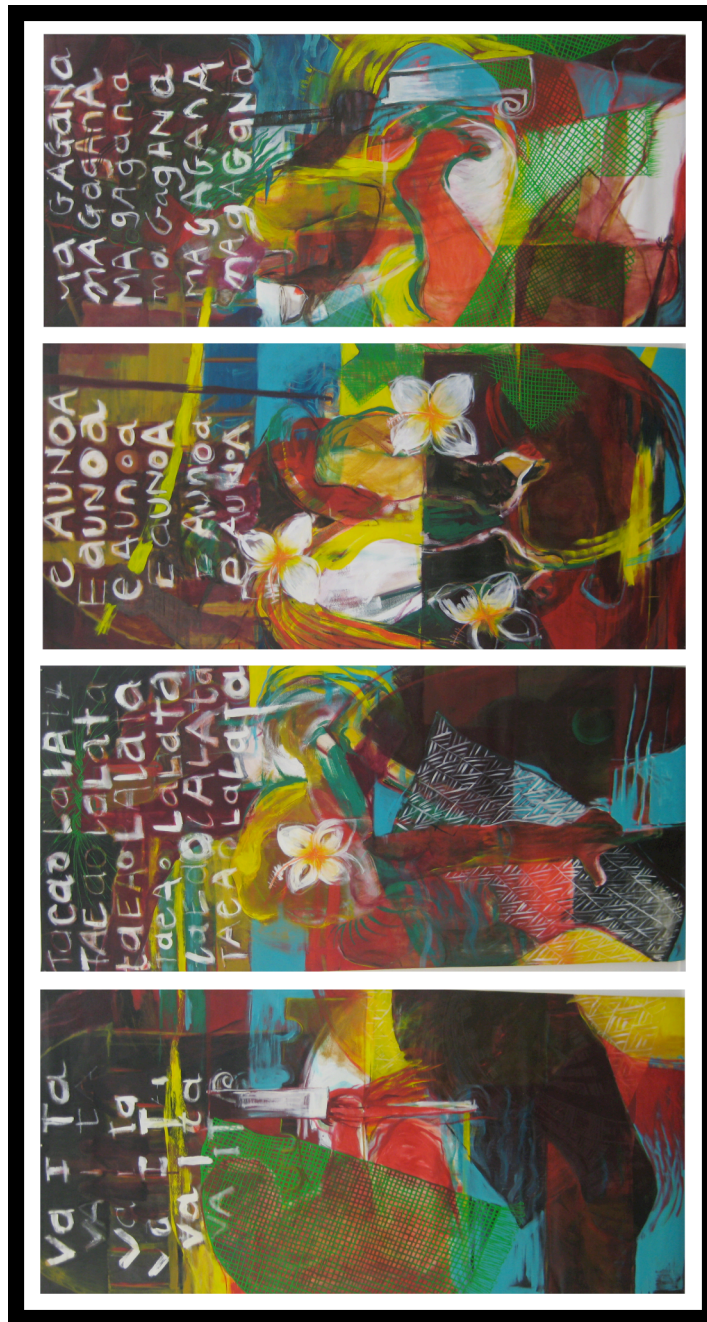


FIGURE 1. *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoo Ma GAgana*, by Lily Laita. Oil on canvas, 2000. 231 cm x 109 cm (each panel). Images courtesy of Deborah White and Whitespace contemporary art gallery, Auckland, New Zealand.

The *vā* constitutes a realm where personal and cultural stories of identity through space and time are imparted. Acclaimed Samoan writer Albert Wendt has stated that the *vā* represents a space in which identity can be mapped: “We each have preferred maps, learned maps—what we believe our cultures, our nations, ourselves were and are. Our maps may be our neighbour’s fictions, we read one another through what we believe, through the mirrors of who and what we are. Those maps and fictions are all in the spiral which composes the story of us in the ever-moving present, in the *Va*, the space between all things which defines and makes us a part of the unity that is all” (quoted in *Va’ai* 1999, 46).

Laita is keenly aware of the storied aspect of the *vā* and actively seeks to link her creative practice to this concept: “In terms of the way that I paint, I think about every color, every form as being a layer and within those layers, they’re all telling different stories and sometimes they relate, sometimes they don’t. Your life experiences and your family’s life experiences, and all the stories that you know and when you’re sharing them you’re bringing them into the space” (Laita 2001). As a result, the illusion of space in her paintings is also dense in narrative meaning: “It’s a way of creating space in a pictorial sense. . . . Within that context of painting on something flat . . . the illusion of space is created by everything that you put down or don’t put down, everything is in reference to one another” (Laita 2001).

Here, Laita alludes to the all-encompassing nature of the *vā* as described by Wendt: “*Va* is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change. . . . A well-known Samoan expression is ‘*Ia teu le va*’—cherish, nurse, care for the *va*, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group unity more than individualism, that perceive the individual person, or creature, or things in terms of group, in terms of *va*, relationships” (1999, 402).

The *vā* is best understood when it is perceived holistically, since it encompasses multiple times and places. That is, all aspects of temporality are present within a single designated space—suggesting the second major theme addressed in Laita’s painting: that personal or collective narratives of identity do not rely on sequential ordering. Here, time and space are *lived* rather than merely recorded or chronicled. Indeed, Sina *Va’ai* described the shape of this time-space

continuum in which the *vā* is located as a “spiral . . . moving back through the past to the visions of an imagined and hoped for future which encircle us in the now of the present” (1999, 57). She continued: “The spaces in-between, the *va*, operates not only at a physical and relational level but also metaphorically to describe post-colonial situations where Pacific island peoples, especially creative writers who work within the realm of the imagination, find themselves negotiating spaces between and across different cultural worlds, redefining and repositioning themselves in the process” (Va’ai 1999, 47). It is my contention that such a view can be extended to include contemporary Pacific artists as well.

In order to perceive the all-encompassing nature of the *vā* as expressed by Laita, it is necessary to conceptualize the relationship between identity and society. I suggest that Laita’s *Va i Ta* offers the opportunity to reconceive space, not just as a “container of things” but also as an important indicator of cultural relationships that may be communicated through art (McLuhan 1968, 6).

VA I TA TAEAO LALATA E AUNOA MA GAGANA

Memory and the recollection of myth constitute the third theme in Laita’s visual rendering of the spatial and temporal aspects of Pacific identity as it exists in the *vā*. In *Va i Ta* Laita uses memory and myth as narrative devices to explore the mythic connection between identity and ancestral memories as imparted through rituals such as the ‘ava (kava) ceremony.

The separate panels are meant to be displayed together and may be interpreted as depictions of events that encompass both “before” and “after” the existence of time and language. In the painting, Laita repeats the four different title phrases six times across the top of each panel: “*Va i Ta*,” “*Taeao Lalata*,” “*E Aunoa*,” and “*Ma Gagana*.” Through her innovative use of repeating text, Laita challenges the notion of time and space as a linear march forward. The words lay the foundation for the composition of the painting: “[There are] two separate works, but [they can be seen as] one work, before and after. The words have separate meanings [but] together they mean something else” (Laita 2001). In repeating these phrases, Laita creates a rhythmic visual “chant” that invites viewers into the liminal space of the painting.

The repetition of segments of the title phrase in the respective panels also serves as a boundary marker heralding the liminal space and time inherent in the painting: “With the repetition of the words, it’s like a header, a sense of continuity, not just with the words, but there is like a horizon line, the idea of being above and below land, conscious and unconscious. . . . Within the first two images, it’s talking about the beginning of the world in a sense” (Laita 2001). Laita explained, “With this line, with these words being repeated, [it’s a] combination of legends and oral traditions, but I’m not making a distinction between the two, I’m combining things. . . . It’s lots of ideas in one space but the idea of a creation myth, that’s what it feels like when I’m making them” (2001).

Laita has created a physical and metaphorical space in her painting to articulate the wider-reaching implications of the *vā* concept. She explained that it was Samoan artist Momoe Malietoa von Reiche who initially introduced her to the phrase “*Va i ta taeao lalata e aunoa ma gagana*”: “She [von Reiche] said that ‘*Va i Ta*’ is the space in between, it’s a context for when spirits [aitu] are running around and everything is going on, it’s the space between dark and light. . . . ‘*Taeao lalata*’ is like the new morning, early morning—not dawn—it’s just early morning, new day . . . I put these together; I hadn’t thought to put them together but if I read it all together it means several things. *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana* can be seen as the space before the new day or the new light is without language, without sound . . . it can be read as the space before the light, before Christianity, the space before time or language, it’s silent, there’s no known language, it’s the space where anything can happen” (Laita 2001).

In this potent space, the painting represents multiple ways that creation myths, land, tattooing, language, and the ‘ava ceremony influence Pacific identity. It also draws on indigenous Māori motifs to further illuminate the connections among people, land, and identity. In this way, Laita moves strategically to foreground not only the dynamic nature of identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand in general, but also her own particular Māori (Ngāti Raukawa), Samoan, and Pākehā ancestry (Tautai nd). Multiple geographies, histories, and identities converge in the space and time that is *Va i Ta*. Laita has drawn on a range of epistemologies to compose the layered meaning of the painting. The viewer must filter through these multiple realms in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the work in its entirety. Laita’s artistic technique creates a space that shimmers and deepens as the various symbols emerge from the painting: “I was playing around with scale but it wasn’t about

foreground, background, it was more about telling another story that relates to what's happening. And I'd usually do it in shellac, I'd make imagery with shellac that's not clear. It's also because it's transparent, it's not quite real, it's hovering between those spaces of what's happening in that work, but because of the nature of shellac, it's shiny, so if you're standing in a certain light, it jumps out, even though there's no sense of form about it" (Laita 2001). Laita's technique of building up multiple layers of paint is a physical expression of the ideas explored in her work: "[T]here's no tense in the work, it's about space. . . . To use this term 'Va i Ta' . . . I think about it is the space between dark and light, the space between that void" (2001). The layers of paint form a physical representation of the space between, and connote a metaphorical space between ideas and creative intention. Using this foundational metaphor, Laita configures Pacific identity.

One element flows to the next in the space of Laita's painting. In panel one, the composition focuses on a figure with bowed head, covered with a transparent green woven mat. The symbolism is palpable: it is a ceremonial display of shame. This meditative figure holds a sharp weapon and is posed to the left of an upside-down 'ava bowl. Directly above the ceremonial figure, in the upper left corner, four small, almost transparent figures (a child, a woman, and two men) stand in front of a fale (house). "They're very small. . . . In terms of creation mythology for Samoa . . . we come from the sun [and these figures refer to that]" (Laita 2001). The figures are also representative of the four genealogical titles established by Nāfanua, the Samoan warrior goddess, which are expressed through Samoan tattoos: "For me, that's the sense of four familial lines, the four titles. None of these figures represent any one thing but there is a female figure that goes across [the text] that has a male tattoo, male pe'a, the idea being that it relates to the idea of the tattoo coming to Samoa from Fiji [by way of women]" (Laita 2001).

In referencing Samoan mythical origins, the figure of Nāfanua, and the ancient practice of Samoan tattooing, Laita's work underscores how oral knowledge remains a significant reference point for negotiating Pacific Island identity. Importantly, in her painting Laita has created a space in which ancient myths exist side by side with rituals that continue to be observed today, such as the 'ava ceremony. In her rendering of the upside-down 'ava bowl Laita refers to the time before 'ava existed: "That's why the 'ava bowl is upside down, this is before time, before anything. I'm playing around with mythology" (Laita 2001).

The artist's interest in engaging mythological tropes is revealed in the intersecting lines of myth and identity of Māori, Pākehā, and the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In doing so, she explores not only the primary definition of *vā* as the *space between*, but also the *vā* as a metaphor for the web of relationships that exist between these diverse groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

A tomb features prominently in all the panels, bisecting the space between their upper and lower sections, and pointing to land as a significant factor related to identity. Laita asserted, "Underneath this line is the reference to tombs, talking about land and star mounds and relation to the land" (2001).³ Placing the tomb in all four panels creates continuity that is consequently disrupted because the perspective is slightly different in each, almost as if we are viewing it from alternative angles. For example, in the third panel, Laita places two frangipani flowers diagonally in the lower half of the painting. Looking through the layers of paint, we can see that the flowers mark the top and bottom of the tomb. We are viewing the tomb on its side. In the final panel, the tiny child and three adult figures from panel one have increased in size: "[The four figures that refer to the sun myth in panel one] are now huge, it's just their feet, so there is this sense of being underground, being in a different space" (Laita 2001). Significantly, the "different space" Laita refers to here is Pulumotu, the Samoan underworld. The toes of the figures are hanging off the edge of the last panel, reinforcing the immensity of the space in question.

Also in the final panel, the green mat that symbolized shame in panel one also takes a new form—that of an 'ava bowl, in which a seated figure wearing a headdress holds a coconut. Laita explained, "The 'ava bowl has become the context. It all relates to 'ava. . . . Because it's a precursor for so many things, coming together, when you drink it you spill a little bit to go back to the land, it's like a toast, and you drink it, it's sort of sharing commonality" (Laita 2001). Laita links the mat with the 'ava ceremony because both are examples of the reciprocal exchanges that cement relationships in fa'a Sāmoa (Samoan way).

The repeated appearance of figures between the second and third panels completes the meaning of the painting. In panel two, a Māori figure crouched in a canoe sleeps beneath the tomb holding a taiaha (long, wooden weapon). Laita envisioned the presence of this symbolic figure as representing "landmarks of the dead. . . . It's like a waiting, of course this is before time, a chronological sense of time" (Laita 2001). In her painting, Laita creates a space in which Māori and Samoan legends form the foundation for the composition. In this way, *Va i Ta*

constitutes a visual representation of Laita's own existence in the *vā* as an individual with both Māori and Samoan genealogical ties.

THE NEXT SPACE

Lily Laita's *Va i Ta* illustrates how myth, memory, and narrative through space and time constitute formative features in contemporary Pacific Islander identity. Moreover, through her painting, Laita has created a forum in which to consider how ancestry and identity are linked to land, and how they are articulated in Māori and Samoan contexts in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In addition, Laita's painting is a commentary on the nature of space in art, as well as on the intersection of the artist's own diverse Māori, Samoan, and Pākehā ancestry: "The physical context is the ground or support [canvas] I'm working on but it's the illusion of space within in the idea 'Va i Ta' where I can bring ideas, and images, and motifs. . . . There's overlapping and creating other meanings of the story. . . . 'Va i Ta' is the process and the context, but at the same time, I'm also part of that process" (Laita 2001). Laita's words highlight the importance of individual narrative and personal and collective understandings about identity. *Va i Ta* is a narrative about the space in which Pacific identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand is formulated and connected to the indigenous people of the place. Indeed, the open-ended nature of *Va i Ta* reflects in a powerful way the complexity of Pacific Islander experience in adopted lands. As Laita explained, the space between is ever evolving: "'Va i Ta' is a representation of space and of some things that go together *but it's not ever complete*" (Laita 2001; emphasis added). Lily Laita's *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana* has broad implications for identity in the Pacific and underscores the increasing space between which Pacific identities are created.

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Notes

1. "Va i Ta" was the title of Laita's solo exhibition in 2000. Here, I focus on the title painting of that exhibition and abbreviate it as *Va i Ta* after the first reference. According to Laita, *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana* literally means "the space without language" (Laita 2001).
2. See Webb 2001. In the thesis, I also examine Laita's 1989 *Pari'aka* triptych, in which she superimposes her body on the Taranaki landscape, her outstretched arms embracing her Māori (Ngāti Raukawa), Samoan, and Pākehā heritages. Laita also acknowledges her mixed cultural heritage by including words in the respective languages. Additionally, the multilingual text links the 1881 invasion of the Māori settlement at Parihaka by government troops with the Mau movement in Sāmoa during the 1920s. In this article, I interpret *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana* through the Samoan concept of *vā*, as expressed in the title of the painting and the foregrounding of the *vā* in its composition and intention. In her exploration of the *vā*, Laita references not only Samoan but also Māori history, motifs, and beliefs. In doing so, Laita's art is embedded in the complex network of shared relationships among Māori, Pākehā (Europeans), and Pacific Islanders in the geographical space of Aotearoa/New Zealand. In addition, I use *Pacific art* and *Pacific Islands art* as descriptive terms, with the awareness that they cannot totally encompass the nuances of Laita's work or the complexity of its cultural context.
3. Laita explained that the star mounds were part of the chiefly sport of pigeon hunting. The birds were released from these mounds, so called because of the distinctive shape in which they were built. They are not to be confused with the royal mounds of Tonga.

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Abstract

This essay considers Lily Laita's exploration of Pacific identity through space and time in her large-scale, four-part painting *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana*, created in 2000. *Va i Ta* constitutes a visual representation of Pacific identity and how it relates to notions of the *vā* (space between). The Samoan concept of *vā* evokes an ever-shifting and productive paradigm that eschews linear or static understandings of space and time. Indeed, the *vā* represents a dynamic moment that contains the present, past, and future. This "in-between" space bursts with potential and creativity. In *Va i Ta Taeao Lalata E Aunoa Ma Gagana*, Laita follows the creative impulse to work in a space without time or tense. The result is a timeless painting that illustrates Pacific identity as it is linked to the space-time continuum of the *vā*.

KEYWORDS: Lily Laita, space (*vā*), time, identity, narrative, Aotearoa/New Zealand, contemporary Pacific art